

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:05 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to Rita L. (Peatsy) Hollings, wife of Senator Hollings; and

Esther Coopersmith, dinner host, and her daughter, Connie.

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner

March 12, 1998

Thank you very much. Thank you, Steve, and thank you all for being here. I would just like to briefly make a few points. I've seen almost everybody around this table in the last few weeks, and I wouldn't think of putting you through another speech. *[Laughter]* But I would like to say a couple of things.

First of all, I want to thank you for your extraordinary labors on behalf of our party. Second, I want to say that I believe the upcoming 150th anniversary of our party is a great opportunity for us to send a signal to America that we expect to be around for another 150 years by continuing to press our country forward into the future together.

I spent a lot of time in the last few weeks reading about the beginning of the Democratic Party and Andrew Jackson's Presidency and all the things he did right—and one or two things he probably did wrong in the light of history. *[Laughter]* But I have very strong convictions now, that are stronger than they were when I came here even, that our party has shed a lot of the baggage that was holding us back in public perception. We have proved that together we can take the country into the future with a strong economy, a declining crime rate, a mending social fabric, a strong position in the world, and that we have a great obligation at this good time for our country to bear down and press forward. And I hope we can all do that around the 150th celebration.

Steve mentioned the victory of Lois Capps in California in the remarkable special election for Congress. Let me say it was a truly remarkable victory because I think that that seat, which was previously occupied by her husband, was one of only three Democratic seats in the country where Al Gore and I did not win in '96. I think we lost by a point because of the Ralph Nader vote, but nonetheless, we didn't quite win it.

The overwhelming lion's share of credit goes to Lois Capps, who is a remarkable person. Many of you know that her daughter, Laura, works for me and has for some time. A lot of the credit goes to the feelings that the voters in that district have about her late husband, Walter, who was also an astonishing human being. But I think that she ran the race in the way that I think that the Democrats ought to run their races. She ran a grassroots campaign, a local campaign. She did not ask for it, nor seek any outside politician to come in and tell the people of her district how to vote.

In so doing, she did exactly what I did when I was Governor of my State. For nearly 12 years, I felt the same way. But she embraced the issues that were reflected in my State of the Union Address and that our party is advancing this year. And she was able to do it because that's what she heard people talking to her about. In political terms in the way people write about these races up here, perhaps one of the most significant things is that she was able to win with a torrent of so-called independent third party expenditures against her on any number of issues. But she did it with old-fashioned grassroots campaigning, common sense, a great heart, and a real fidelity to the kinds of issues that I think we have to continue to press, including the Patients' Bill of Rights, the whole range of educational issues, and the resolution of the tobacco litigation in a way that helps to protect our children from the dangers of tobacco.

It was a very impressive campaign. It is a mark, if you will, of the future of what we could do all over the country this year. But if we want to do it, we have to do what she did. We have to have good candidates. They have to be closely tied to the people. They have to be interested in grassroots work and not ashamed to get out there and really hustle and listen to people and work with them. They don't have to have more money than their opponents,

but they have to have enough money to have their message heard and to answer whatever onslaught is put against them. And if we do that, I believe we have a good chance to win, because I think the tide of public opinion is moving our way because of the level of confidence people have in our country and where we are, and the sense that they have, notwithstanding that confidence, that we have great challenges to face and we need to embrace them.

So I feel wonderful about this race, both personally because Hillary and I care so much for Laura, Lois's daughter, and because I cared so much about her husband as well as our new Congresswoman from California. But I think it bodes well for the Democrats if we are prepared to realize that politics is not about what has been said and done in Washington, politics is about what is said and done and felt passionately in the neighborhoods of this country.

Finally, let me say that this is an interesting time for me. We are trying to—and for our country now—we are trying very hard to work out an agreement that would pass comprehensive tobacco legislation. I know you're all seeing the press reports of it. There are obstacles. There are differences, but I think we've got a good chance to pass it. And there are only 68 days left, work days left in this session of Congress. And that doesn't sound like a lot of time, and it isn't. But I think it would be unbelievable neglect for the Congress to leave this year without passing that tobacco legislation.

A thousand children a day have their lives shortened because, illegally, they began to smoke in response to advertising campaigns and other inducements—1,000 a day. That's too high a price to pay to fool around and wait until next year just because this is an election year and people have other things to do. So that's the first thing I wanted to say; we're working on that.

Secondly, I am about to leave on a trip for Africa, and I'm going to countries that no sitting President has ever visited before. No President's ever made a serious trip to Africa. And I think it is very important for our economy, very important for our foreign policy, very important for our efforts to protect the global environment and to deal with the spread of disease and other major global issues we'll all be facing together.

We can build a great partnership there. I'm excited about that.

When I get back, I then have to go on a long-planned trip to South America to the second Summit of the Americas. We had the first one in Miami 4 years ago, and we are looking forward to continuing to work in our hemisphere. Every country but one is a democracy. Our fastest growing trading partners are our neighbors in our hemisphere. And the fact that the United States has reached out and tried to build economic and other partnerships with these good people who share our part of the globe is an important thing.

I'm then going in May to meet with the other leaders of the largest seven economies, and our political partnership with Russia, in England. And then I just announced that I have moved up my trip to China for late June because of the strong recommendations of our people and the progress we're making in working with the Chinese on a whole range of subjects. And obviously, the welfare of the American people in the 21st century will be shaped in large measure by the partnerships we have with the largest country in the world.

So this is a good time. We're working; we're doing remarkably well as a country. But I want to say, as I say every time, the Democratic Party is not the party of self-congratulation; it is the party of forward motion. We have no business engaging in self-congratulation except to cite it to the voters as evidence that we can be trusted to do more, even better, if we're given the chance to do it. We should be worried about the future; that's what elections are about. We should be grateful for the conditions that exist today. We should recognize there are a whole range of challenges out there, and we should be intensely focused on meeting them. Because of your help, that's exactly what we're going to be able to do.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:30 p.m. in the Balcony Room at the Sheraton Luxury Collection. In his remarks, he referred to Steve Grossman, national chair, Democratic National Committee; and Laura Capps, Staff Director for the Office of Speechwriting at the White House.